

Friday, December 1, 1972

Rault Fire Rescue Two Rooms Away

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By LANNY THOMAS

Firemen got to within two rooms of the five trapped women in the 15th floor beauty salon of the Rault Center and may have been within minutes of rescue when they were forced to leap—three of them to their deaths.

Fire Supt. Louis San Salvador revealed how close the rescue attempt had come in explaining why his men did not attempt to use rescue nets to break their fall.

He said there would have been little chance they could have survived even if nets were used and placing nets out would have only served to make them jump sooner when rescue was minutes away.

In explaining why he felt nets would have been of little use, San Salvador said a person weighing 150 pounds at that height would have a weight of six tons when he hit a net.

"As for speculation and criticism by laymen, I don't resent it as much as I appreciate their concern," the superintendent said.

YESTERDAY A Charity Hospital doctor said he felt the lives could have been saved had nets been used.

Without referring to the doctor by

name, San Salvador added "no professional could possibly agree" with that conclusion.

"I'm sure that after the report (of the fire investigation) is issued, the people of New Orleans will feel that they have a good fire department, well trained, highly dedicated even though they are broken hearted because of the helplessness they feel in this type of fire."

While San Salvador would not comment on the probe of the fire, he reiterated his belief that the fire was the result of an explosion.

"I am absolutely satisfied that it had to be a blast of some sort," he said. "There is no way that much fire could have occurred in such a short time."

SAN SALVADOR said firemen got to the building within two or three minutes of the call and the fire was well under way at the time.

He said there was no question that a sprinkler system in the building would have helped in controlling the blaze.

San Salvador said what concerned him was what was feeding the fire.

Deputy Fire Supt. William McCrossen said that over a 50 year period, 96 per cent of the fires where sprinklers

were used were contained by the time firemen arrived.

He added their has never been a case of multiple fire deaths in a building using sprinklers.

Countering what he views as unjust criticism of the rescue effort, San Salvador said firemen made "numerous rescues" inside the building. He said three persons were rescued from a stranded elevator.

"Unfortunately, the public only saw

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what was happening outside the building," he said.

San Salvador said he is calling together all firemen tomorrow to ascertain exact details of what happened inside the building.

POLICE, MEANWHILE were searching for a man who reportedly told a secretary in the building that she should leave because there would be a fire there.

Officers said the woman, who was not identified, may have taken what the man said out of context, but they want to talk to him, just in case, because of the possibility of arson in the fire.

The arson element entered the picture because there were two fires in the building the same day.

Police said the woman told them the man looked like a person who used to work in the building.

The tragic blaze Wednesday which killed four people and injured four others, coupled with a fire in Atlanta yesterday that claimed nine lives, brought new calls for stronger safety standards for high-rise buildings.

State Fire Marshal Raymond Oliver, who toured the burned out upper stories of the building at 1111 Gravier, yesterday with Gov. Edwin Edwards, was the latest to join in the demand for sprinkler systems in new buildings here.

Oliver said that in his opinion a sprinkler system in the Rault building could have brought the fire under control enough to save the lives of the four who died there.

He said he hopes a special committee he established last May will be able to get the legislature to make such systems mandatory in new construction, they are not now required.

HE ALSO SAID he hoped elevators could be programed to return to the first floor when a fire breaks out. Two

of the injured were trapped for a time in one of the Rault elevators.

And from Washington, Richard Bland, chairman of the Presidential Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, criticized safety codes calling such deaths "a needless loss" since the knowledge and the hardware is at hand to minimize the effects of these fires.

"If the people of this nation want a significant decrease in life and property loss," Bland said, "it will result from their insistence that codes be adopted and enforced without delay.

"Personally, I am going to refuse to enter any public building which does not completely comply with reasonable safety standards," he added.

THREE OF THOSE who died in the fire were among five persons who jumped from a 15th floor window onto the roof of a parking garage below. The two who survived the leap are in critical condition at Charity Hospital this morning.

Dead are:

Mrs. Jacquelyn Ann McConnell Mailho, 31, 127 East Oakridge Park, Metairie.

Mrs. Norris Farley, 56, 2112 Green Acres Road, Metairie.

Mrs. Jannas McBeth, 30, 4229 Marigny.

Charles J. Michel, 36, 1326 Daniel St., Kenner.

The women died in the jump, Michel was found dead in the hall of the 14th floor.

Injured and in critical condition are:
Mrs. Wilma Williams, 26, 1724 Caffin Ave.

Mrs. Natalie Smith, 39, 528 Aurora, Metairie.

Lloyd Caldwell, 26, 2704 Whitney Place, Metairie.

A fourth person injured was released the day of the fire. He is William J. Allen, a New Orleans Public Service Inc., employe who was trapped with Caldwell in an elevator.